

# education *update*

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## Bridging the Widest Gap

### *Raising the Achievement of Black Boys*

Educators cannot overlook the persistent achievement gap between black boys and their peers. "These patterns are not going away and are not limited to one local area," says Education Trust Senior Associate Carlton Jordan. "Wherever I go, African American boys are at the bottom." Now that school systems must report and analyze disaggregated data about student groups, educators have begun "a new conversation" to find solutions for black boys, notes Jordan.

#### From the Principal's Office to Prison

Reports by the American Council on Education, the Education Trust, and the Schott Foundation show that black boys spend more time in special education, spend less time in advanced placement or college prep courses, and receive more disciplinary suspensions and expulsions than any other group in U.S. schools today. The Schott Foundation started the Black Boys Initiative in 2003, says President Rosa Smith, because "black boys represented the worst-case scenario for a group coming out of public education." The foundation's 2004 state-by-state report on black male students found that, among other negative indicators, more black males receive a GED in prison than graduate from college.

"This problem is not genetic,"

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## educationupdate

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states author and education consultant Jawanza Kunjufu. "It is systemic." In many cases, a debilitating combination of inadequate resources and low expectations in schools that serve large numbers of black boys results in this group being held back, researchers say. Jordan and his colleagues report that these schools have "more than their fair share of teachers who are out of field or long-term substitutes. And often the curriculum and the expectations are quite low." Experts tracking black boys in schools also cite inattention to gender learning styles, misinterpretation and abuse of zero tolerance policies, negative peer pressure, and lack of commitment to create a culture of care and nurturance for black boys.

A 2004 study by the Schott Foundation, *Public Education and Black Male Students: A State Report Card*, found that although black males make up only 8.6 percent of public school enrollments, they represent 22 percent of expulsions and 23 percent of suspensions. In terms of discipline, these students face inconsistency, notes Vernon C. Polite, professor at Bowie State University and coeditor of the book *African American Males in School and Society*. In an independent study, Polite found that for the same offense, suspension days ranged from 2 to 22. Because of abuse and misinterpretation of federal and state guidelines for suspension and expulsion, Polite says, large numbers of African American boys are wandering the streets daily and engaging in crime. This is frustrating, Polite notes, because "the very problems we wish to mitigate are being exacerbated."

### Gender Affects Learning Styles

In many schools, black boys are removed from mainstream education by disciplinary

interventions or by tracking them into special education. Kunjufu argues that a major agent in the disproportionately high representation of black boys in special education and in disciplinary interventions is the lack of accommodation for gender differences in learning styles. Part of the problem is that less than 1 percent of all elementary school teachers in the United States are African American men, Kunjufu adds. Because 83 percent of elementary teachers are white women, he sees a direct correlation to statistics showing that white girls are least likely to be referred for special education. Of black boys who enter special education, only 10 percent return to the mainstream classroom and stay there, Kunjufu notes, and only 27 percent graduate.

To create a more equitable learning environment for black boys, Kunjufu advises educators to accommodate specific learning differences tied to gender. "If you know that girls mature faster than boys—almost a three-year difference—instead of placing boys in special education, we should allow for those differences or consider single-gender classrooms," Kunjufu suggests. Accommodations can include shortening lesson plans, allowing more movement in the classroom, and holding physical education classes daily. "If you know that girls are more verbal," he adds, "then allow for the possibility that boys will not only communicate differently, but will also express an interest in reading



a little later than girls." To allow for these differences, Belgium, Germany, and Switzerland either delay the entrance of their boys until age 6 or 7, or they separate boys and girls. In addition, the United States has 500 single-gender classrooms and more than 100 single-gender schools.

Where single-gender is not an option, Kunjufu is optimistic about how schools are responding to accountability pressures from the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act. One Maryland school implemented a prereferral process, in which teachers cannot recommend a child for special education placement without a six-week pre-intervention process of trying mainstreaming strategies. As a result, he says, that school has seen a 68 percent reduction of black boys in special education.

### Access to Rigor, Access to Support

Rigorous academic focus was missing at the Midwestern high school Polite worked at and studied for his book *African American Males in School and Society*. With such a lack of focus, a student who is not geared toward college enrollment and who remains in school tends to

become the "increasingly invisible student who sits in the back of the classroom and gets by," says Adam Behar, director of public relations for the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program. AVID works with students who achieve at average academic levels to prepare them for four-year college eligibility by providing support during and after school.

AVID has shown that these students are capable of completing a college-prep curriculum, Behar says, "if we provide access to rigorous curriculum and intensive support." A study of AVID's 2004 African American high school seniors reported that 100 percent graduated from high school and 81 percent were accepted to a four-year college. "Rigor and support—that's the proven formula," Behar says.

"MANY STUDIES SHOW THE SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN TURNING LIVES AROUND IS THE ONGOING PRESENCE OF A CARING ADULT."

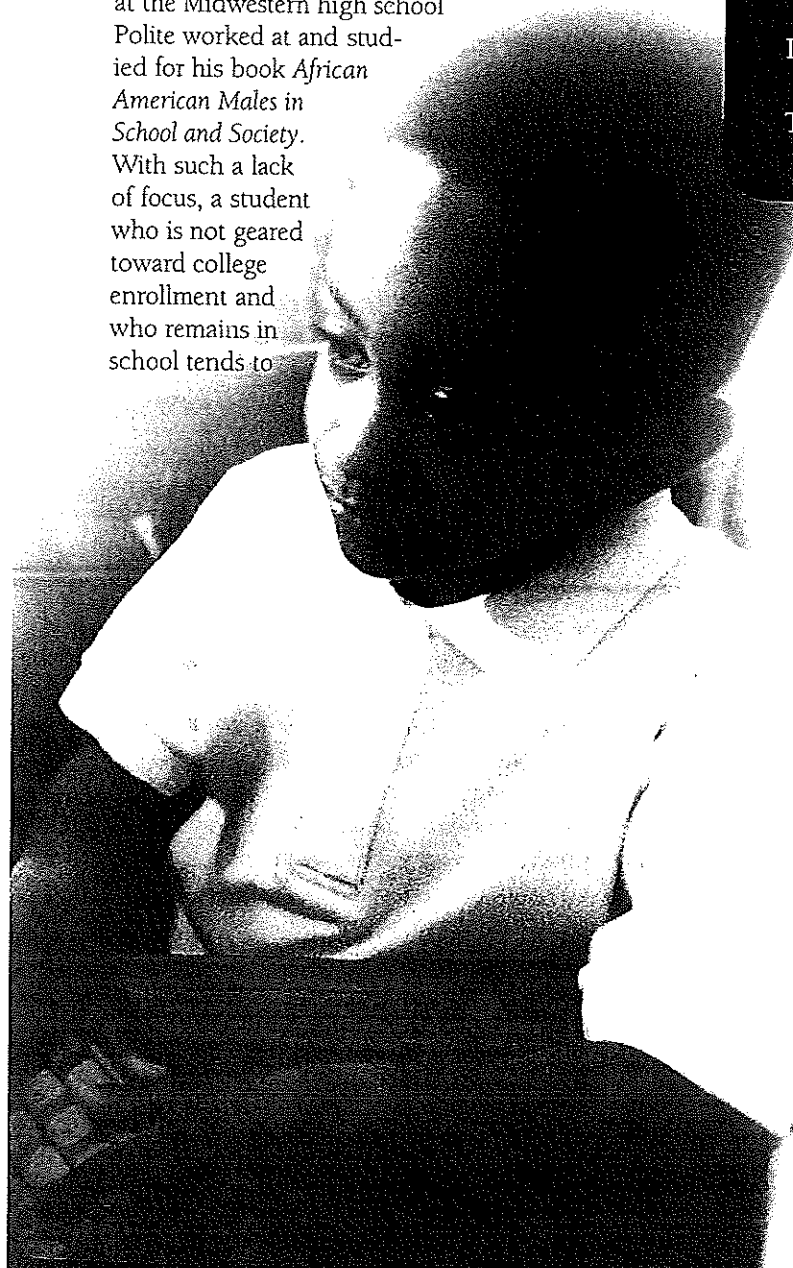
Polite adds that school leadership needs to shift toward a focus on instruction instead of building management. Administrators can begin to address instructional needs by looking at the raw data of course enrollments. If you walk through the school and see groups of students missing from science and math advanced placement programs, you should be concerned, he says.

### Combat Stereotypes with Care

In addition to harder data on the challenges black boys face in public schools, researchers point to less-quantifiable factors. Professor Melissa Roderick of the University of Chicago notes that black boys often do not feel cared for in their school communities. Roderick has found that the disconnect between black boys and a caring school is most acute when they transition from smaller, attentive middle schools to larger, anonymous high schools. Polite also noted that at Metropolitan High School (the name he used for the school in his book), the perceived lack of caring was the most devastating factor for black boys.

At Metropolitan, Polite recommended that principals and administrators focus their hiring practices on finding people who are able to relate to and care for students from different backgrounds. In addition, Polite pointed to professional development schools as places where teachers and teacher candidates can be

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trained to care through inquiry, curriculum development research, and reflection. Nell Noddings, a professor at Stanford University, a former K-12 math teacher, and the author of several books on caring, observes that "young black men and boys growing up without male role models and in conditions of poverty probably do need, more than anyone else, that assurance that somebody really cares. Many studies show the single most important thing in turning lives around is the ongoing presence of a caring adult."

Unfortunately, black boys are often alone in their self-advocacy. They must combat the negative stereotype that being black and masculine does not match up with being smart and going to school. Extensive research shows that one

of the principal factors contributing to the underrepresentation of minority men in college and their underperformance in primary and secondary schools is the absence of minority male teachers as role models. "No question," says Kunjufu, "one thing we can do for black boys is increase [the number of] black men teaching." As resources for change, Kunjufu suggests the 85,000 black churches, 106 black colleges, more than 10 national black sororities and fraternities, and almost 200 black radio stations in the United States.

In Maryland, Rep. Steny Hoyer is establishing Men Equipped to Nurture, an intensive program

designed to dramatically increase the number of African American and other males entering the teaching profession.

### Litmus Test for Leadership

The downward trend for black boys in school and society will not end unless educators and community and business leaders make black boys "the litmus test for their personal leadership," says Smith. As a former school superintendent, she encourages school administrators to lead in ways that nurture "this student group most vulnerable to school failure." To improve the achievement of black boys, she advises school leaders to bring together reciprocal layers of communication, data collection, early education, accountability, and literacy instruction.

In its 2003 report, Education Trust highlights some schools, districts, and states that are improving math and reading achievement for African American boys. Jordan points to progress made by the D.C. KEY Academy in Washington and Norview High School in Norfolk, Va., which are looking at their data and making sure this vulnerable group does not fall behind.

"Regardless of race, gender, home environment, or the community or housing complex our students come from, high expectations for their behavior and academic performance will not change," says Susan Schaeffler, founding principal of the D.C. KEY Academy. "The expectation that our children will perform at a high level is set in stone, and our staff is committed to doing whatever it takes to make sure our children succeed, regardless of the obstacles they encounter." ■

—LAURA VARLAS

### Lessons for Leaders

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Once we have chosen what matters, we as ASCD members have a tremendous support system to enable us to move forward with our choices. Among all of the extraordinary ASCD resources, the adopted positions can serve us well as we speak on behalf of all our students. For example, this year's position on the whole child states that we believe in a comprehensive approach to learning that moves beyond the narrow emphasis on academic achievement and assessment. It represents a vision that I also hold dear and can ask others to share.

But sharing in a vision becomes much more compelling for others when, in the words of Mahatma Gandhi, we *become* "the change [we] wish to see in the world." That indeed is our challenge. ■

Mary Ellen Freeley is the superintendent of Malverne Union Free School District in Malverne, N.Y.

### Share Your Thoughts

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